The historical imagination in early modern Britain

History, rhetoric, and fiction, 1500–1800

Edited by
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Introduction

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There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceas'd.
– *Henry IV, Part 2,* 1.1.80–81

. . . imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown. . . .
– *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 5.1.14–15

"History" and "story" are derived from the same root, and they have converged again in modern times, especially through the recognition of their common dependence on imagination. Both history and literature are forms of cultural memory, and in this respect, too, they have a link with imagination. Historians pretend to recapture the past in all its fullness, but in fact they are bound by the limits and conventions of narrative prose. Nor can literary artists, even the most "classic" among them, remain free of the toils of history; for as Shelley admitted, "this is an influence which neither the meanest scribbler nor the sublimest genius of any era can escape."[1]

Since antiquity the *ars historica* and the *ars poetica* were sister genres, with overlapping issues and similar values. From the time of Cicero and Quintilian the art of history has made claims on truth, but like poetry, it has also aimed at beauty, or pleasure (*voluptas*), and goodness, or utility (*utilitas*).[2] In more recent times, too, the realization of such a common pedigree and such common purposes has reinforced the ties between historians and literary scholars and opened further what has been called

[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, preface to *Prometheus Unbound.*

[2] See D. R. Kelley, "The Theory of History," in *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy,* ed. Charles Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 746–62.

"the open boundary of history and fiction."[3] As historians have come to recognize the aesthetic dimension of their craft and the necessity to resort to imagination to fill in gaps in the narrative, so literary scholars are acknowledging the historicity of literature, its value as a reflection of bygone worlds not recoverable through conventional documents, and the use of literary criticism for the interpretation of such documentation.[4] Disciplinary frontiers cannot obscure the fact that historians and literary scholars are engaged in the common enterprise of finding human meaning in both "works" and "documents" (according to the distinction made by Martin Heidegger and popularized by Dominick La Capra).[5] Such, in any case, was the hope and the premise of the conference on which this volume is based.

In early modern England the distinction between history and literature was, at least technically, an anachronism. In fact "literature" encompassed history, since the term conventionally signified anything preserved in writing ("letters"), and so did the field already defined in the sixteenth century as the history of literature (*historia literaturae*) or literary history (*historia literaria*).[6] Within this literary field, however, there was a basic and generic division between the arts of history and of poetry; and as Michel de Certeau remarked, "This internecine struggle between history and story-telling is very old." It sets the truth of history into opposition not only to poetry but also to "genealogical story-telling, the myths and legends of collective memory, and the meanderings of the oral tradition."[7]

The struggle referred to by Certeau is indeed very old, appearing first in the practice of Herodotus and then in the theory of Cicero, whose "first law of history" (*prima lex historiae*) was to tell the truth and the whole truth.[8] According to this premise of the *ars historica,* it was for

[3] Suzanne Gearhart, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[4] See, e.g., A. D. Harvey, *Literature into History* (New York: St. Martins, 1988), and Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[5] Dominick La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 30.

[6] E.g., Christophe Milieu's *De Scribendis universitatis rerum historia* (Basel, 1551), bk. 5, "Historia literaturae," 244–305.

[7] Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other,* trans. B. Marsumi and W. Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 199.

[8] Cicero *De oratore* 2.62.

poets, lawyers, orators, and other professional liars to violate this law. Philosophers agreed on the primacy of truth but, as usual, not on its nature. Plato famously banned poets from his republic (while drawing on their insights), whereas his student Aristotle contradicted him and elevated poetry, as the source of a high, more universal sort of "truth," to a place above history. For historians, however, the case was simpler: There is truth, and there is error. There is history, that is to say, and (in the words of Paul Verlaine) "all the rest is literature."

There is a deeper structure to this ancient debate, one tied to the Baconian (and Galenian) distribution of knowledge into the faculties of memory, imagination, and reason, which correspond to the genres of history, poetry, and philosophy.[9] According to this (again, as Francis Bacon admitted, "very old") scheme, the struggle between history and storytelling is reducible to the relationship between memory and imagination. For historians and scientists imagination has usually been seen as an obstacle to the faculties of memory and reason and has needed, as Bacon put it in his methodical way, "weights, not wings."[10] In literary tradition, on the other hand, imagination has appeared – like Hermes – as a divine messenger and poetry as a second theology or, in the humanist phrase, "another philosophy" *altera philosophia*.[11]

Which of the two, then, offered the best access to truth: History or Poetry ("imaginative," capital-L Literature in a modern sense)? Memory or imagination? Philosophy and psychology did not find the answer to this question at all easy, for Aristotle – still the reigning authority – had regarded imagination as very close to, if not an actual form of, memory, and certainly occupying the same part of the soul. Imagination in an Aristotelian sense was essential to the act of thinking and was prior to memory, which was in effect the subsequent recalling of images. If memory was the "mother of muses," imagination was their very act of procreation. Both faculties were ways of calling up representations of things absent but recoverable or thinkable – "So that," as Hobbes wrote, "*Imagination* and *memory,* are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names."[12] This was also the view taken by Giambattista Vico, who helped

[9] Grazia Tonelli Olivieri, "Galen and Bacon: Faculties of the Soul and the Classification of Knowledge," in *Shapes of Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,* ed. Donald R. Kelley and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991), 61–82.

[10] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* 1.104.

[11] J. M. Cocking, *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[12] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 160.

restore the links between history and poetry by asserting the value of imagination against the primacy of reason argued for by Baconian and Cartesian philosophers.[13]

In many more concrete and practical ways this convergence must be apparent to all writers and readers. Essential to history writing, the question of truth haunts literary scholars as that of imagination haunts historians; and both, of course, look to their art as an access to the understanding of society, politics, and public life. History and literature are united, too, in questions of language, including the mutual dependence on metaphor and the "blurring of genres" that has occurred both in historiography and in literary forms such as drama and the novel.[14] In general, as literary artists, scholars, and critics have mined the treasures of history, so historians have exploited the resources of literary art; and it seems useful and opportune to encourage exchanges on this common ground extending across the disciplinary frontiers that constrict all of us.

But of course questions remain. Is this convergence of arts the maturing of history, as some historians like to think, or is it "the revenge of literature," as Linda Orr has called it?[15] Does it represent an advance toward a larger view of historical truth and a more critical understanding of literature, or does it defeat the purposes of both? Does a rapprochement between history and literary theory signal for the former a return to the sort of impressionism suggested by G. M. Trevelyan's famous "Clio, a Muse," which celebrated history as an art form? Does it mean for the latter the revenge of the "old historicism"? We hope not. In any case the answers to these questions will not come from discussions of methodology or philosophy but must lie in the quality of the projects undertaken in this interdisciplinary spirit; and this is the justification of the present volume.

The convergence of history and literature in the Elizabethan period has been an object of much scholarly comment. The later sixteenth century marked both an end to the "dead season of English poetry," according to George Saintsbury, and "the Period of Origins of modern English prose."[16] For F. Smith Fussner it also marked the beginning of the period

[13] Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians,* trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 95, 161; and Vico, *New Science,* 699.

[14] See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 19–35.

[15] Linda Orr, "The Revenge of Literature," in *Studies in Historical Change,* ed. Ralph Cohen (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 84–108.

[16] George Saintsbury, *History of Elizabethan Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1887), 1:28.

of "the historical revolution."[17] The common ground of these literary phenomena was, of course, language, which is perhaps the most concrete form of cultural memory, but which also, in an age of dawning historical awareness, maturing print culture, and self-conscious cultivation of "letters" becomes a more conscious and deliberate means of expressing this memory. In the contemporaneous works of Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, and of William Camden, Edward Coke, and Richard Hooker, Richard Helgerson has seen "what retrospectively looks like a concerted generational project";[18] and it was a project that continued into the period of what has been called "the Historical Renaissance,"[19] and indeed even into times of conflict and revolution. The papers in this volume continue and, we hope, extend and deepen discussions of this cultural and literary revival, which is founded on and informed by concerns with the forms, substance, methods, and truth-value of history and its relationship with imaginative writing.

The concept of history in early modern England appears, at first glance, to have been very conventional. History had begun its public life as a liberal art with an assured place in the humanist program of the liberal arts (*studia humanitatis*); and initially ancient topoi and concepts served to give definition to what remained essentially a literary genre.[20] J. H. M. Salmon examines one contribution to the *ars historica,* Degory Wheare's *Method and Order of Reading Histories* (first ed. 1623), which carries on from the similar works of Francesco Patrizzi (whose work was Englished by Thomas Blundeville), Jean Bodin, Bartholomäus Keckermann, Gerhard Vossius, and others. Rejecting myth, medieval credulity, and the extremism of both Catholics and Protestants, Wheare drew upon the work of modern historians like Phillipe de Commynes, Francesco Guicciardini, Jacques-Auguste De Thou, and Paolo Sarpi and philologists like

[17] F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought 1580–1640* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), on which see also Fritz Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1967); Joseph Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and D. R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology and the "Light of Truth" from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

[18] Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

[19] Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier, eds., *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[20] Especially Cicero *De oratore* 2.36: "History is truly the witness of times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the mistress of life, and the messenger of antiquity."

Joseph Justus Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon; and he turned to the ideas of the ancients – Polybius and Tacitus – in order to realize the political and civil potential that narrative history possessed. Like Bodin (and unlike Patrizzi), Wheare shifted emphasis from the writing to the reading, from the literary to the utilitarian aspects, of history.

The same sort of shift can be seen in sixteenth-century confessional debates, which likewise turned to history for aid and comfort. As Patrick Collinson remarks, John Foxe sought, in his martyrology, "a past both true and usable" – history both, in Cicero's words, as the "light of truth" and as the "mistress of life." There was no contradiction here since truth in Renaissance history was exemplary – offering "paradigms of moral and political behavior," as Herschel Baker put it.[21] Religious behavior, too, Collinson would add; and in any case, Foxe, writing in the tradition of sacred rather than profane history, pursued a truth higher than the small-minded factuality demanded of civil historians. Shaping his facts more with an eye to the self-fashioning of the self-described "godly community" of English Protestants than to the Ciceronian ideal, Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* appears to modern readers more as a myth than the mirror to which classical (and modern scientific) historians have aspired.

How has history, whose semantic fortunes have always intersected with those of "story," separated itself from such fictional impulses? This is the question asked by Joseph Levine, who takes Thomas More's *Utopia* as a test case. His conclusion is that this critical discrimination between imagined fiction and commemorated fact is a product of the scholarly attitudes of Renaissance humanism and that it is reflected specifically in *Utopia,* which displays More's consciousness of the disparity between human reality and ideals – of the lamentable fact that history does not provide the sort of utility that he sought in his social speculations – in conspicuous contrast to the beneficial way history operates in Utopia itself.[22] The historical sense displayed in *Utopia* is surely a function of the new science of philology to which More and his colleagues were drawn. Was it also a function of More's ironic self-awareness, literary role-playing, and inner tensions, which both connected him with and set him off from a society fallen so far from the religious ideals it professed?[23] How much was his perspective the product of his positioning as both

[21] Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 16.

[22] See Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 69–71.

[23] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), might be called as a witness in this connection.

insider and outsider? In More's work, history and literature are combined in ways that are still difficult to sort out.

In the barrage of Ciceronian commonplaces, history was also celebrated as the "messenger of antiquity," as both Wheare and Foxe, in their different ways, believed. This is the aspect of historical study examined more particularly by D. R. Woolf, who finds a new "historical sense" in more popular interests in the remains of bygone ages. Renaissance scholars had long since discovered antiquity in its material remains such as medals and coins.[24] By the seventeenth century such antiquarian curiosity was apparent in contexts not only of elite learning, such as the Society of Antiquaries, but also of popular culture, in which historical literacy was also making its appearance. Woolf illustrates this through an account of the finding of a treasure trove of antique coins in provincial England in the early seventeenth century. Here the history of things (in the words of George Kubler)[25] supplements the history of words to suggest the directions taken by historical curiosity, imagination, and interpretation in the effort to find present meaning in a dead and apparently irretrievable past.

The horizons of "history" in a modern sense were extended beyond politics, and literary and social boundaries were crossed, in a variety of ways. From a story of a "murder in Faversham" in Holinshed's chronicle, Richard Helgerson deduces a number of such new historiographical frontiers, including popular history, the history of crime and private life, women's history, local history, socioeconomic history, and anecdotal history.[26] Losing its aristocratic thrust and political edge, history broadened its popular appeal and added human richness and color as well.

This point is underlined by Annabel Patterson's study of what might be called the new anecdotalism of Tudor historical writing. In medieval exegesis, anecdotes, in the form of parables, were contrasted with historical and allegorical interpretation (teaching *parabolice* rather than *historice* or *allegorice*);[27] but these genres, too, became blurred. In a more

[24] See Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), especially 167–79, on numismatics.

[25] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

[26] See also Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), as well as Helgerson's own *Forms of Nationhood.*

[27] Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 223.

secular form the historical anecdote not only enriched the content of historical writing but also suggested changes in the rules of evidence to accommodate the eccentric, the exceptional, and the secret as offering their own sort of – in a sense still symbolic or parabolic – illumination of the human condition.

Rebecca Bushnell opens up still another para-historical genre by showing the significance of gardening books in the fashioning and (in more than one sense) cultivation of the English countryside and the assimilation of nature itself, or at least a "second nature," to this literary and historiographical project. This underappreciated form of literature, which picks up and extends an old classical tradition and touches on the fields of natural history and chorography, is located at one of the intersections between agrarian life and Baconian science, between the particularity of the land and the growing generality of nationhood, between nature and art, and – like history itself – between experience and truth.

Three essays exploring the place of Thomas Hobbes in the historical culture of early modern England contribute to a portrait of a new Hobbes quite different from the conventional view held by philosophers and political theorists and more in line with the currently fashionable rhetorical approach, which emphasizes the humanistic, prescientific, practical dimensions of Hobbes's writings.[28] David Wootton looks not at the ahistorical Hobbes of *Leviathan* but rather at Hobbes the translator of Thucydides, qualified admirer of Machiavelli, and author of *Behemoth,* who – like Degory Wheare – searches history for intelligible causes, ways to understand the psychology of aggression, and a potential basis for political decision making.

In *Behemoth* Fritz Levy sees the traces of the early Thucydidean (rather than the later Euclidean) Hobbes and an illustration of the shift in Renaissance historical thought, in the context of war and constitutional conflict, from moral to political utility. Patricia Springborg, too, installs Hobbes in the older and gentler, or at least more prudent, humanist tradition with its concern for the imaginative recapturing of an immedi-

[28] *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes,* ed. G. A. J. Rogers and Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and cf. David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

ately usable past, which, while remote, is – through the "mirror of memory" – recoverable.

The literary sources of historiography are emphasized by J. Paul Hunter, who – through a reading of a sensationalist pamphlet of the 1660s, *The Second Spira* – examines the ambiguous attitudes toward truth in novelistic, protonovelistic, and journalistic forms of publishing and their expanding readerships.[29] In a period of Puritan inhibitions about fiction, prose fiction both before and even after "the novel" was tied to pretensions of historical truth, or at least expectations of veracity by the reading public, and only gradually declared its independence of historical memory and took its stand on literary imagination. Here readership joins authorship as an agent that shapes the forms, contents, and standards of fiction, nonfiction, and ambiguous areas in between.[30]

The expanding horizons, increasing depth, and growing complexity of history are the principal themes of Mark Phillips's essay on social and sentimental narratives in the eighteenth century. For Adam Smith history treated not only observable but also invisible events, such as the thoughts or even passions of historical agents; and such sentimentalism, rediscovered also in ancient authors such as Tacitus,[31] informed eighteenth-century narratives of the history of private life, epistolary history, and biography. The ethnographic turn of Scottish philosophy, illustrated by the work of Adam Smith, David Hume, Lord Kames, and Adam Ferguson, gave further impetus to these explorations of cultural history.

Patricia Craddock sees a parallel privatist and culturalist line of inquiry appearing tentatively in Edward Gibbon, who was drawn by literary and historiographical convention to heroic public figures but who also appreciated the achievements of men of science and letters, since it was the peaceful creators and benefactors rather than the public movers and shakers who contributed to the happiness of humanity, even though the latter tended to eclipse the former in terms of fame. Although not

[29] See also Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990).

[30] On the narrative ambiguities of *res factae* and *res fictae* – and *Geschichte* and *historiae* – see Reinhard Koselleck, "History, Histories, and Formal Structures of Time," in *Futures Past,* trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1985), 92–104; and further discussion by Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding,* trans. Michael Hays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 25 ff.

[31] On the experimental aspects of Tacitus see Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 113 ff.

drawn as much as Hume to such intellectual "characters," Gibbon was moved to pay special biographical attention to two such civil heroes, Boethius and Petrarch.[32]

The stories about history told in this volume do not add up to a simple, Whiggish narrative of progress from myth to enlightenment, of "history" extricating itself from fictive "story," or even, on the literary side, of Literature and Imagination escaping the intellectual hegemony of History and Reason. Nor is there a "great tradition" in the dogmatic style of F. R. Leavis or a historiographical canon recognizable to older professional historians. Rather, the Baconian faculties and corresponding literary genres continued to intermingle in a striking variety of ways, reaching new social depths and cultural breadths precisely because of the conflict of faculties and the blurring of genres.

One thing may be clearer: What has become apparent in the past generation in the wake of the "new rhetoric" and renewed appreciation for the historical imagination was, four centuries and more earlier, reflected in the fictional and nonfictional writing of early modern England. We repeatedly see myth and other products of the imagination reflected in the stories that historians pretend are true – or see the truth emerging from the sleep of reason induced by modernity or in the creations of imaginations that, reversing Bacon's dictum, have been given wings, not weights. History is not over, the novel is not dead, imagination still flourishes, and there are always more stories to tell.

[32] See S. K. Wertz, "Hume and the Historiography of Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993): 411–36.